



The celebrity talk show: Norms and practices



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ABSTRACT

Celebrity talk shows are a major but relatively unexplored form of broadcast talk. This article examines the norms and practices of celebrity talk show interviewing through a comparative analysis of journalistic or news interviewing. Data are drawn from four popular celebrity talk shows and three news interview programs in the U.S. The paper identifies two norms that guide talk show interactions and distinguish them from news interviews. The first norm is personalization, which allows hosts to use their own experiences and interests as a resource for questioning and responding to their guests. The second is congeniality, which fosters a predominantly friendly interviewing environment that enables guests to present both themselves and the product they are there to promote in a positive light. Although the paper is primarily concerned with elucidating these interactional norms and their implementation, it also addresses the mix of occupational concerns and market pressures that they reflect, and broader implications for the changing media landscape.

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1. Introduction

Talk shows are a part of daily life in America. From early in the morning as people get ready for work until late at night as they slide into sleep, celebrity talk shows play on television. These shows are not just a steady background hum to American life, but are an influence on public discourse. As with other forms of broadcast talk, a particularly interesting event or interview on one of these programs can become a focus of both mediated and interpersonal discussion long afterward (Clayman, 1995; Ekström and Johansson, 2008; Salem, 1995). Since clips or entire episodes are often posted on the internet, their potential influence reaches beyond the 3.8 million people who may watch *The Tonight Show* in a given night (Bibel, 2012) to encompass those who watch and share online later. Because of the way technology is changing the media landscape, the talk show has played an expanding role in cultural life attracting performing artists, cultural icons, and increasingly campaigning politicians (Baym, 2013b; Farnsworth and Robert Lichter, 2007; Just et al., 1996; Molek-Kozakowska, 2013).

To some scholars and public commentators this shift in emphasis from traditional news to talk shows is a symptom of the corruption of the media landscape (Allan, 1999; Langer, 1998). For other scholars it is merely indicative of a shift to a new “media regime” (Williams and Delli Carpini, 2011). Williams and Delli Carpini argue that instead of looking on the 20th century model of

broadcast news, with its strict separation from entertainment as the normative or correct form for the media, it should instead be viewed in historical context as just one of a succession of media models. Just as the media moved from the partisan press of early America, to the penny press, to the broadcast model of the 20th century, that model is now being overtaken by a new model of the media (Williams and Delli Carpini, 2011). In this new model the distinction between news and entertainment is less clear-cut, with opinion media and infotainment talk shows becoming a more significant source of public affairs information (Jacobs and Townsley, 2011). Some scholars have already begun to chart the interesting hybrid genres of entertainment news that are emerging in this new regime (Baym, 2013a, 2013b; Hutchby, 2011; Hutchby, 2013).

The divide of the broadcast model was first entrenched in the early days of talk on radio. As radio developed an association rapidly formed between formality of speech and seriousness of subject, with more formal speech being used for more serious subjects and more prestigious guests (Cardiff, 1980; Scannell and Cardiff, 1991). Eventually two broad types of interviews became common: news interviews, which featured restricted speech practices, public officials or experts, and serious topics (Clayman and Heritage, 2002), and talk shows of all types, which featured talk more closely resembling casual conversation, celebrities or members of the public, and topics mostly about personal life and the popular culture. This sharp demarcation between entertainment and news came to characterize the broadcast media regime (Williams and Delli Carpini, 2011), and scholars and public opinion alike tended to value the news over entertainment. However, as society moves away from the broadcast

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media regime it becomes more important to understand entertainment programming as well as news programming. Whereas once entertainment programs were merely the home of celebrity and domestic concerns, they are now also becoming home to political and cultural conversations (Baym, 2013a).

Due to this historical penchant for serious news media, journalistic or hard news interview programs have received substantial scholarly attention compared to entertainment interviews on talk shows (examples include Clayman, 1988, 1991, 2010; Clayman and Heritage, 2002; Clayman and Romaniuk, 2011; Ekström et al., 2006; Greatbatch, 1988; Heritage, 1985; Heritage and Roth, 1995; Heritage and Greatbatch, 1986; Montgomery, 2007; Roth, 2005; Schudson, 1994). There are many entertainment interview programs, but this paper will distinguish two main types. In recent years, the first type, audience participation talk shows, featuring ordinary people as guests, has received scholarly attention (Carbaugh, 1996; Gamson, 1998; Grindstaff, 2002; Hutchby, 2006; Livingstone and Lunt, 1994; Munson, 1993; Thornborrow, 2000, 2001; Tolson, 2001), particularly as it has become clear that talk shows of all types are starting to have political effects, even having the power to shape voting behavior and foreign policy positions (Baum, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005; Baum and Jamison, 2006). However, the second type of talk show, the celebrity talk show, has become more prominent as it is here where entertainment and serious cultural considerations are starting to meet (Baym, 2013a; Farnsworth and Robert Lichter, 2007; Molek-Kozakowska, 2013). In this version of the talk show typically guests are celebrities such as movie and television stars, musicians, etc. The main topics of discussion are popular culture, and the guest's professional and personal lives, although political topics may also be discussed. These celebrity talk shows have also received some scholarly attention with research focusing on satire (Baym, 2007, 2010, 2013a, 2013b; Jones, 2010; Tolson, 1991), backstage production and downstream reception (Horton and Wohl, 2006 [1956]; Tuchman, 1974), and some aspects of the interaction (Bell and van Leeuwen, 1994; Fairclough, 1995; Tolson, 1991). This paper will add to this last body of research, identifying key norms of conduct in the typical celebrity talk show interview. To set these norms in relief the paper will contrast them with the well-researched norms of the news interview. Although these two sets of norms represent two extremes of interviewing, and in other contexts such as morning programs, or cable news talk shows, or even celebrity talk show interviews with politicians, there may be a blend of such norms, it is the perspective of this paper that to understand these blends first the poles must be explored. To grasp how entertainment genres and serious news are merging in the new media regime it is important to understand both in their pure state, which will in turn add depth to the literature on hybrid genres (Baym, 2013b; Hutchby, 2011, 2013).

In exploring these two types of interviews and their contrasting sets of norms it is useful to begin by considering the interests and motivations that parties bring to the encounter. For the case of the hard news interview, Clayman and Heritage propose we can think of the interaction as premised on an underlying “contract” (2002). Journalists need politicians to explore the issues of the day, and politicians need access to publicity to promote their platforms. This idea can also apply to celebrity talk show interviews where talk show hosts need celebrities to draw interest to their show, and celebrities need talk shows to draw interest to their products. The confluence of interests that shapes both types of interviews is much the same, but also shaped by different historical economic constraints. News interviews have historically been understood to be non-commercial enterprises with the FCC limiting the effect of the market (Epstein, 1973). Although today market pressures are increasingly heavy (Starr, 2012), journalistic professionalism is still valued (McChesney, 2003, 2012). The professional norms of journalism require journalists to be seen as neutral, and also as independent from their political sources as adversarial watchdogs

Table 1

Contrasting norms of celebrity and news interviews.

	Celebrity interview	News interview
Interviewer stance	Personalization	Neutrality
Treatment of interviewee	Congeniality	Adversarialness

of democracy (Clayman and Heritage, 2002). Market pressures are one force behind the rise of hybrid genres, where such norms are bent or blended (Thussu, 2007), but prestige programs still adhere to the historical norms of news interviewing. In contrast, celebrity talk show hosts do not have the same professional codes and public service ideals, and market pressures are a driving force in the talk show environment. Guests are there to promote their current book, film, television show, album, and selves in an appealing way, and the hosts are concerned with ratings. In order to schedule favored guests, and earn ratings, hosts work to help guests achieve their goals, thereby coming to be seen as a good stop for publicity. Hosts can also be a selling point of a show, a familiar face to draw in viewers. This leads to a mode of interviewing on celebrity talk shows that is both personalized to feature the host, and relatively congenial to showcase the guest.

2. Personalization and congeniality

The result of these pressures is two interactional norms: the norms of personalization and congeniality in the talk show interview, which contrast with neutrality and adversarialness in news interviewing (summarized in Table 1). The norm of personalization leads talk show hosts to present themselves as personally invested in the interview (Horton and Wohl, 2006 [1956]; Langer, 1981), at times expressing their own views as a resource for questioning and reacting to guest's answers. Their questions also often cover personal subjects and perspectives (Lauerbach, 2010; Tolson, 1991)¹. Hutchby (2011) has shown that in some hybrid genres personalization is a resource for aggressive or adversarial questioning, but in the celebrity talk show personalization is generally not drawn on for this purpose. The practices of personalization, however used, contrast dramatically with traditional hard news interviews where the norm of neutrality restricts interviewers from taking a similarly personalized stance (Clayman and Heritage, 2002).

The second contrasting norm in celebrity talk show interviewing is the norm of congeniality, which leads hosts to build a predominantly friendly environment that features the guest and their product in a way that will be interesting for the audience and flattering for the guest. Practices that are geared to the norm of personalization can also enact the norm of congeniality. For instance while a host is offering support for a guest's answer and showing him or herself to be personally engaged, he or she may at the same time portray the guest as interesting. This norm of congeniality goes beyond the type of cooperativeness and affiliation typical of ordinary conversation (Tolson, 2001) and entails active work to showcase the guest. This contrasts with news interviewing, where the norm of adversarialness leads the interviewer (IR) to disagree with, criticize, or otherwise challenge their interviewees (IEs) (Clayman and Heritage, 2002).

¹ This places the celebrity talk show interview closer to the type of news interview Martin Montgomery calls the experiential interview, but guests on a talk show need not have witnessed any remarkable event, they are understood to be remarkable already (Montgomery, 2007). *The Discourse of Broadcast News: A Linguistic Approach*. London: Routledge, Montgomery, 2010. Rituals of Personal Experience in Television News Interviews. *Discourse and Communication* 4(2):185–211.

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